

**Speech given by Mary McAleese, President of Ireland
to guests at Hyde Park Barracks Museum
for the dedication of the Great Irish Famine Memorial
13 March 2003**

Peter Francis (acting Manager, Hyde Park Barracks Museum):

This is a tape recording of the visit of Mary McAleese, President of Ireland, to Hyde Park Barracks on the 13 March 2003. Expected starting time was 2:15pm. Location is the Irish Famine Memorial on the southern side of Hyde Park Barracks. The VIPs include: President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, her husband Dr Martin McAleese, Noel Dempsey and Mrs Dempsey, Declan Kelly, Ann Kelly, Ann Webster, Tom Power and from the Historic Houses Trust of NSW, Jill Wran and Peter Watts.

**Speeches by Peter Watts & Tom Power
after which Tom Power presented the President with a
specially commissioned symbolic replica of the memorial**

Tom Power:

Madam President, I would like you to accept this on behalf of the Irish Famine Commemoration Committee and all the friends and supporters who helped us to erect this memorial.

President of Ireland, Mary McAleese:



It's a joy for Martin and I to be here today to be among our friends again. It was lovely to be here four and a half years ago.

I stood on this hallowed ground and I've never forgotten that moment and I had the profound personal honour of inaugurating the Australian Memorial to An Ghorta Mor, The Great Irish Famine. And as you said, on that occasion I symbolically removed a stone from the outer wall setting in motion what has been a fantastic labour of love. A creative genius of sheer hard work culminating in this truly beautiful, evocative and I think, austere and very sacred monument. It has something—there is an austerity about it—that speaks a language all of its own. Maybe it's as well not to unpack that language because distilled into that very austerity is just so much mood, so much that can't be said and maybe so many things that shouldn't be said. Just so many things that should be felt and I return today to see for myself the realisation of that work.

I want to thank from the bottom of my heart, all those who made this possible, including the generosity of the Trust in saying 'yes' and saying 'yes' to helping the monument that was in the hearts and heads of so many people, to make it a reality. You can see even from the little bouquet of flowers that are placed outside that it has become a place of very special and deep pilgrimage, profound pilgrimage, for people.

It's a tribute to the artists who designed the memorial that in following the very simple path of the sculpture we can still today experience a very, very uncanny link, a harrowing echo, of the journey that was done by the names, the names etched and of course the names that are not etched on the glass, people who left forever their homeland.

There's a lovely old expression that comes to mind that I think we gather under its umbrella here today. I look at all of us, you know, and we are very well dressed and we're well fed and we live - those of you who live in Australia—live in a country that is dynamic, full of hope, full of young people, full of confidence. I come from an Ireland that is today full of hope, full of confidence, where, for the first time ever, we have reversed the tide of Immigration. We no longer export our people as we did for the last century and a half. They're well fed and their shoulders are back and they're full of hope and trust in the world.

The saying is that those who drink the water should remember with gratitude, those who dug the well. The hands that dug the well that we drink from, well, they go back to these hands here and it would be an awful thing, wouldn't it, if those rough, calloused hands who never knew the joy of childhood and who never knew the joy, for a long part of their childhoods, of a full table, of the conviviality of sitting around a table of plenty. Who never knew that. Wouldn't it be an awful thing if those people were consigned to the ignominy of being forgotten. And the truth of the matter is that every one of them, I would say, went to their graves believing that they were people of no consequence - people who didn't matter to anyone else. I'm sure there were many times in their lives when they felt a sense of lostness that we can only begin to imagine. And so it's the wonderful thing about goodness and kindness in the human heart that we gather to remember them because there were people who simply refused over the generation to forget. People who kept faith with them and who now vindicate their memory in this very, very moving and very deeply spiritual way.

The memorial conveys to us the stark silence of the table that if they sat around it at all, well, it was a worthless effort, wasn't it, to sit around a table with nothing on it? A table on which no plate would ever be filled again. A symbol of the broken families who turned their backs on Ireland forever. Those who survived because, of course, many of the people who came here would have known what it was like to lose family to death by starvation. And the poisoned fields that they would never again till, the fields that had betrayed them in so many ways and the symbol, I think, of the abandoned spade, the eternally rotten potatoes, those are kind of haunting symbols. They left the blighted fields of their birthplace and the only one certainty, I suppose, that they had was the life they had known, that was gone now and they were heading off into an adventure that probably for them didn't feel much like the kind of adventures that we go on, but felt quite horrifying and quite terrifying.

We spoke just yesterday, in Brisbane, to a man whose Grandfather came here at the age of twelve. Can you imagine it? He came with his brother aged eleven. There was someone supposed to meet them, but the person who was supposed to meet them never met them and they had no address. Imagine at the age of twelve and eleven. I have children who are long past that age now, but at twelve and eleven could you imagine heading out into the world? They came by ship. You can just imagine what it must have been like and how many stories are replicated – thousands, millions of them replicated. And yet the man that I met, a very successful, well-doing businessman now whose children are pillars of the community with wonderful jobs and they drink the water, they drink the easy water that was dug from those wells that were dug by their ancestors.

I think the sculpture takes us through that awesome period of dislocation, so beautifully, from people who had a life that was familiar. For all its awesomeness and all its grimness it was at least familiar. Through the blank Barracks walls, presumably which held no clue to the kind of future they were going to face. They really didn't know when they came through, when they came through those gates what on earth lay in front of them. They knew very well what lay behind them. And it was dreadful and they were hoping against hope that maybe something, maybe some seed of hope lay through these walls, but they couldn't be sure.

And then suddenly we're with our ancestors on the other side of the wall and the same stark table we meet again but now we meet it differently. It has a bit of tentative hope about

it. That maybe on this side of the wall there are full plates and maybe there's the hope of help. There's the hope maybe of a job. There's the hope maybe of a family sitting around a table and sharing a meal, that very simple thing that we in our generation take so much for granted.

But I think that for me perhaps the most evocative part of that memorial - is the part that certainly is hardest to look at - is the panel dividing the old life from the new. The panel that so poignantly lists the names of those thousands of orphaned Irish girls who arrived in Sydney, found themselves within these walls, never expected to find themselves on these walls. And then as the names peter out into the blank part of the glass, we remember all the names that will never appear anywhere on a monument but need to be remembered in our hearts and never to be forgotten. Who can imagine what they thought or what they felt and indeed who can imagine what they would make of this day. I hope that wherever they are, I hope their spirits feel deeply vindicated by the fact of not forgetting. By the goodness and decency of people who refuse to forget and this sacred memorial is how we remember them. And in remembering them it is how we also acknowledge our indebtedness to them and to all the men, the women and the children who came with nothing - maybe came with the most meager of possessions. In that tiny little corner those little meager possessions that belonged to them.

I was just thinking as I looked at them, if my kids were to put their possessions there you'd need a huge big shelf. The biggest shelf you can imagine wouldn't be big enough to hold all the possessions that they harbor. Even at their relatively still modest age and yet they came here to start a new life with so little, so very, very little and out of those little things, that out of the really big, the big hearts they had and the big hands they had and the, well their, just their sheer indomitable spirit they built this great democracy under the Southern Cross and they gave it its edge, they gave it its values they gave it its spirit of egalitarianism, they gave it, just its spirit that never gives up with their courage and their guts and their gumption they distilled all of that into the spirit of this great country.

And so we gather to remember with gratitude those who dug the well. I pay tribute also to all of you who are the guardians of their story. The guardians of what is our shared history. The keepers of the sacred memory that is so deeply respected, so beautifully respected in this place. I want to thank the Government of New South Wales, the City of Sydney, the Land Titles Office, to Jill Wran on behalf of the New South Wales Historic Houses Trust, to Angela and Hussein, of course, the artists who executed this very, very beautiful monument. To everybody who contributed to the cost and in particular to the community. Long before cost was mentioned there had to be a dream harboured in people's hearts. It's the dream that gave birth to the idea and from the idea then to the monument. And to each of you who harboured that dream and then came together to force its execution no matter how hard the journey was. And last because you will certainly never be forgotten, to Tom Power, and the Committee of the Great Irish Famine Commemoration whose loving commitment and whose belief in this project - and its not just a project, it's a belief in people - inspired and brought this magnificent memorial into being.

I think that we are a very privileged generation. We were born to full tables. We were born to opportunity on our doorsteps and it's important that we're capable of finding inside our hearts the gratitude and the humility to acknowledge our indebtedness to those who have gone before us, those who were born in harder times, on whose shoulders we now stand. I don't know who it was coined the expression about standing on the shoulders of giants, but we are very privileged, aren't we? We look at the landscape of the future and it doesn't really frighten us. We have education, we have money in the bank, we have a car at the door, we have places to travel to as tourists, our children never knew what it was to experience that.

But Irish expression that has captured in the Irish words (...). Those of you who know the Irish language, know that it indicates a body demeanour that is so broken and so dispirited. I'm sure that it is an exact description of those who came through those gates. The bodies round shouldered, the heads down, crippled by the burden of what lay behind them and crippled with fear of the future. We do not experience those feelings and if we look to the landscape of the future and we stand tall and we see the future as a place of opportunity it is because we stand on their shoulders and they hold us up and I think today, in a very special way, we return to them the gift of generosity and the gift of life and the gift of spirit and love of life that they gave to us as their greatest gift of all. The faith in life itself, the joy in life itself, squeezed out of so much pity. They squeezed the joy of life and they gave it to us as our inheritance and I'd like to think, maybe, they are very proud of us this day. I know I'm very certainly very proud of them. And I'm very, very proud indeed of those who have honoured their spirit in this beautiful and evocative and very moving way.